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Realistic Man, Fantasy Policeman: The Longevity of Ruth Rendell's Reginald Wexford

Ruth Rendell first introduced Chief Inspector Reginald Wexford in *From Doon with Death* in 1964; we last see him 49 years later in *No Man's Nightingale*. Rendell develops the protagonist in her detective series, which includes 24 novels and five short stories, by adapting the conventions and tropes of the detective and police procedural genres set forth by her predecessors like Georges Simenon, Dorothy Sayers, and Ed McBain. However, while her detectives operate within the framework of the fictional Kingsmarkham police department, Rendell did not stifle Wexford with mundane bureaucratic constraints. Instead, she focused on presenting a realistic man with idiosyncrasies, shortcomings, and fears, as well as a character who adapts to the changing social and cultural environment alongside the reading public. Rendell has called Wexford "a fantasy policeman in a fantasy world," using investigative methods which do not always adhere to standard police procedures (Salwak 87). As a result, forensic details are also largely missing from her narratives, such as in-depth descriptions of autopsies, lab processes, and coroner reports found in other contemporary crime novels and popular television programs. She said, "The wonder is that thousands of readers (including policemen!) seem to like it this way" (87). Thousands is an understatement; Rendell's worldwide sales figures are currently estimated at 20 million (Penguin UK), a testament to her own longevity and popularity with readers even after her death in 2015.

Since the late 19th century, writers of the British cozy mysteries set in the countryside as well as the more urban-based American crime novels have woven the latest discoveries in scientific and forensic evidence into their puzzles. Most famously, Arthur Conan Doyle modeled Sherlock Holmes on Dr. Joseph Bell, a man under whom he studied at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. Holmes draws on fingerprint and handwriting analysis, chemical testing, and other scientific methods to solve many of his cases. Dr. R. Austin Freeman debuted John Evelyn Thorndyke in 1908, whose “expertise lies in things rather than people; his power comes not from superhuman intellect, but from specialised knowledge, technology and method” (Priestman 2003, 47). As the 20th century progressed, Golden Age writers such as Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie researched methods of poison identification and included several examples in their fiction. P.D. James, Rendell’s friend and creator of Detective Chief Inspector Adam Dalgliesh, worked in a hospital and the Criminal Division of the British Home Office (Reynolds 85-86). Her novels, especially *Death of an Expert Witness* in 1977, reflect her experiences and encounters with forensic pathology.

It was in the United States, however, where forensics emerged as a consistent feature of crime fiction produced in the second half of the 20th century. The police procedural novel, popularized by Ed McBain’s 87th Precinct series in the 1950s, attempted to convey realism by focusing on actual methods and teamwork required to solve crimes – forensics included. In 1990, Patricia Cornwell published *Portmorte*, featuring forensic scientist Kay Scarpetta and catapulting the profession to the forefront of the police procedural and popularizing a subgenre: the forensic thriller. Scarpetta appears in 22 novels, and Cornwell will likely surpass Rendell’s output of Wexfords. Her sales are listed as over 100 million (www.patriciacornwell.com). Kathy Reichs has written 19 novels in her Bones series featuring Temperance Brennan, a character she

modeled on herself, a working forensic anthropologist (kathyreichs.com). Tess Gerritsen, author of the Rizzoli and Isles series featuring a female homicide detective and a medical examiner, trained as a medical doctor (www.tessgerritsen.com). Both Reichs's and Gerritsen's series have inspired television series. Jefferson Bass, the pen name of two authors, one of whom is a forensic anthropologist, launched the *Body Farm* series in 2006 (www.jeffersonbass.com). The trend continues as contemporary British and European writers of modern police-centered novels, such as Michael Connolly (Detective Harry Bosch), Ian Rankin (Detective Inspector John Rebus), and Henning Mankell (Inspector Kurt Wallender) incorporate forensic detail into their works. All three series have been adapted into successful television dramas.

Unlike Ruth Rendell, most of these authors were or are practitioners themselves or expressed an interest in forensics. Several have even published non-fiction works on the subject: Scottish crime writer Val McDermid, creator of the criminal profiler Tony Hill, recently penned *Forensics: What Bugs, Burns, Prints, DNA And More Tell Us About Crime*, drawing on the research she had conducted while writing her bestselling novels (NPR "Prolific Crime Novelist Turns Talents To Dissecting 'Forensics'"). The public's appetite for forensic-driven thrillers seems to be insatiable. How, then, has Chief Inspector Reginald Wexford remained a beloved and relevant character, with readers pleading with Rendell up until her death for more stories of Kingsmarkham's competent investigator?

The weekly *New York Times* best seller lists from 1964, the year Rendell published *From Doon with Death*, reflected the popularity of Cold War spy fiction, with John Le Carre's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* recurring for 50 weeks. Two James Bond novels from Ian Fleming and *The Venetian Affair* by Helen McGinnis also appeared (Hawes Publications). The *London Sunday Times* best seller lists included these novels as well as Len Deighton's *Funeral in Berlin*.

Two Golden Age detectives, Agatha Christie's Miss Marple (*A Caribbean Mystery*) and Ngaio Marsh's Roderick Allyn (*Dead Water*), also made appearances, perhaps satisfying the reading public's desire to recapture an era of detective fiction in which murders are solved and criminals are punished, especially during this time in which uncertainty prevailed (*The Sunday Times Digital Archive*).

Reviews of *From Doon with Death* were positive. Anthony Boucher wrote in the January 17, 1965, issue of *The New York Times*, "Ruth Rendell establishes herself as a welcome contender in the straight whodunit with her first novel," though "the trick answer should be obvious to the reader long before it occurs to competent Chief Inspector Wexford." Perhaps more accurately, Julian Symons wrote in the *Sunday Times* on November 1, 1964, "Miss Rendell's intelligent, realistic writing lifts the book out of the simple puzzle class." She was not expected to compete with the spy novelists, and she brought a refreshing writing style and a surprising plot twist to what appeared on the surface to be a traditional British mystery set in a small community. However, Rendell moved away from the amateur detectives of Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie. *From Doon with Death* did resemble the police procedural in that Wexford was not a lone private investigator like the protagonists created by American hard-boiled writers such as Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Her chief inspector operated within an infrastructure, though Rendell's primary focus was not police methodology.

Subsequent Wexford novels were well-received by critics and readers and have remained popular, despite the proliferation of novels in the genre appealing to a growing fascination with forensic procedures featured in high-profile investigations, courtrooms, television programs, and films. A closer examination of Rendell's Wexford novels – along with published and recorded interviews with the author – reveals the distance Rendell intentionally creates between Wexford

and forensic procedures and mirrors the author's own connection to her protagonist. This space often extends to technological advances in communication and information-gathering and only increases the chief inspector's development as a round character as he navigates the evolving cultural landscape in England and beyond.

Rendell's attitude towards forensics is quickly established in *From Doon with Death* through Wexford's interaction with the processes as well as the language he chooses to describe the experts involved. Wexford and Inspector Burden search for the killer of Margaret Parsons, a local woman reported missing by her husband before her body is discovered in the woods. The chief inspector and his team attempt to track down Doon, the person who had lovingly inscribed books to Margaret when she was known as Minna. In her debut novel, Rendell is aware of the reader's expectations of crime scene protocol: the farmers who find Margaret's body "primed with knowledge from television serials . . . had touched nothing" (32). Rendell's view on writing police procedurals for a similar audience was straightforward: "Although I try not to make errors in my descriptions of police work, I accomplish that largely by leaving it out" (Carr 248). When she did include forensics, she explained, "the assumption is that it would be right. Everybody, every reader and TV viewer, accepts that it would be right and ought to be right" (Arthur "The Fall of Forensic Science?").

When Inspector Wexford appears on the crime scene in *From Doon with Death*, he is only directly involved in a possible forensics analysis when he inquires about the tire tracks found in the area. Later, he scrapes dust from the treads of a car's tires himself, but refers to the experts who conduct the analysis, "the lab boys," as the faceless, nameless "they" (*Doon* 173). Otherwise, Rendell separates her protagonist and the actual scientific procedures which were

routinely performed during and after the discovery of a dead body. Because Wexford is operating in supervisory role, this distance is believable and accepted by readers.

When the chief inspector does address forensic activities, lab reports, and the pathologists themselves, his comments are passive and dismissive. In *Doon*, he says, “We’ll get the fingerprint boys on it” (40) and “I want a sample taken from those tires, Mike” (61). He tells Mr. Parsons (and the reader) “There was no sexual assault” without alluding to any details about how that information was procured (76). Readers also encounter Wexford after he has received results, such as when we learn “the prints on the lipstick definitely hadn’t been made by Mrs. Parsons” (43). During the course of the investigation, he refers to the “handwriting bloke” (172). At the inquest, the medical expert cites superficial scratches on Margaret’s legs; conversely, Wexford’s contribution is simply, “it was hard to tell if there was a struggle” (107).

Yet, Rendell gives the reader a reason to believe Wexford does know a bit about forensics when he finds a plastic rain hood and comments, “it won’t take prints” (*Doon* 156), and she gives him credit for his experience when he learns that fingerprints from an object were analyzed, and “as Wexford had expected, they didn’t match” (47). In another scene referring to handwriting analysis, a suspect tells Wexford, “I’ve given you a specimen of my printing,” but the chief inspector says “printing changes a lot in twelve years” (171) and “[his] writing is very round and clear. I got the feeling he doesn’t write much and his writing’s never matured” (172). Most readers are not handwriting experts, but Wexford’s feeling seems legitimate. We believe him. In *Wolf to the Slaughter*, he again refers to handwriting experts and says to Burden, “Have you ever heard one of those johnnies give a firm opinion one way or another, Mike? I haven’t. No, I’ll send this down to the lab but I’ll be very much surprised if they can tell me anything I haven’t deduced for myself” (31). He seems to know enough about forensics to conduct proper

investigations in Kingsmarkham without claiming significant expertise. In one of Rendell's short stories published in the late 1970s, "When the Wedding Was Over," Wexford agrees to serve as a reader of a yet unpublished true-crime novel, but qualifies his reply with "you do realize I can't do more than maybe spot mistakes in forensics?" (*Collected Stories* 245).

By including Wexford's comments, Rendell can ensure her protagonist earns the reader's trust: Wexford knows what he's doing and the crime will be solved, even if the author does not interrupt the narrative to describe forensic procedure. In *Kissing the Gunner's Daughter*, first published in 1992, Rendell writes "Archbold had come in with Chepstow, the fingerprint man" and he "did his test on the doorknob, the fingerplate, the jamb" (35). Rendell gives the fingerprint man a name this time, but one can only imagine what, exactly, constitutes his test; however, such details are irrelevant. Wexford, and the reader, are satisfied that proper scene-of-crime procedures are followed, and our attention returns to the mystery.

Ruth Rendell was a reporter in West Essex for several years and turned to writing fiction so she could work from home while caring for her son. The detective genre was not her first choice, and she only submitted a manuscript of what was to become *From Doon with Death* after another novel, a drawing room comedy, was rejected by a publisher. "Crime writing chose me," she remarked to her friend and fellow writer P.D. James in 1989 (*Ruth Rendell with P. D. James*). Thus, Chief Inspector Wexford and his sidekick, Inspector Mike Burden, appeared as policemen in Sussex. Rendell said she never anticipated creating a series, let alone a popular one spanning fifty years. "I never felt very fond of Wexford," she admitted during an evening at the Bishopsgate Institute in London, one of her last appearances before she died. "He was never real to me. He grew slowly. No drama, no revelations." When asked how Wexford has changed as a character, the author said once she realized she would write more Wexford novels because they

were lucrative, she decided to “make him more the kind of person I want to write about and live with” (“Fifty Years of Wexford”).

The kind of person Rendell could live with would not spend much time in crime labs, discussing scientific methods used to identify perpetrators; he would rely on his intuition, perseverance, and an understanding of human behavior cultivated over many years in the police force. He would be well-read, liberal, and a reliable husband, father, and civil servant. Rendell said in an interview with Diana Cooper-Clark, “In order to make Wexford a real person, it seems to me essential that he should have a wife and children and grandchildren and forebears” (115). She also bestowed Wexford with convincing flaws: he struggles with his inclination to prefer one daughter over the other; he overindulges in food and drink, neglecting his health until he experiences a thrombosis and is forced to lose weight; he snaps at his subordinates (less so as the series progresses); and he gripes about new technology. At times, he relies too much on his intuition – his “fingerspitzengefühl”/“fingertip feeling” (*A Sleeping Life* 226) – resulting in personal humiliation or a setback in the case.

Through Burden, the reader learns that Rendell’s early version of Wexford has a “violent and sometimes shocking sense of humor” which encompasses “rage, ridicule and satire” (*A New Lease* 16). He refers to his constituents as customers, suggesting a coldness which is later replaced with a greater empathy for his victims, witnesses, and certain suspects. Though Rendell softens him a bit in subsequent novels, his personality does not change entirely. Nearly thirty years later, in *The Babes in the Wood*, Detective Constable Lynn Fancourt is in awe of her supervisor but ponders Wexford’s “mysteries”; she wonders “how could one man be liberal, compassionate, sensitive, well-read and at the same time ribald, derisive, sardonic, and flippant about serious things?” (90-91). Rather than confusing the reader, these contradictions only

increase Wexford's credibility. He behaves like a real person who happens to work as a police officer. Rendell has admitted that Wexford is a bit like her as well as her father, who was a teacher and loved English literature (Carr 250).

She may have altered the original Wexford's personality and traits to suit her taste, but Rendell adhered to her preference for excluding forensic details. She once remarked:

Having now established for myself a means of livelihood, I was constrained to work within the detective genre and doing so I found that I preferred to deal with the psychological, emotional aspects of human nature rather than the puzzle, forensics, whatever most seem to come within the ambiance of the detective novel. (Cooper-Clark 110)

Rendell confessed she disliked forensics and intentionally avoided learning and writing much about them. Several of the Wexford novels do highlight the contribution of forensic evidence to advance the case; however, it is important to note most of these revelations come after the chief inspector has already identified the villain or imagined the logistics of the crime. For example, forensic entomology appears briefly in *Road Rage*, but the crime is solved due to Wexford's special knowledge of rare butterflies. A print found on the side of a bathtub made by someone with a scarred finger is a major clue in *Shake Hands Forever*, yet Wexford employs the unorthodox method of compensating an informant out of his own pocket to follow his primary suspect. The fingerprint match only validates his intuitive police work, which he conducted independently. When pressed by the victim's husband about the fingerprint analysis, Wexford replies with annoyance, "We're not magicians," which, ironically, is exactly the type of response the pathologists usually give to the Kingsmarkham investigators (37-38). There is one murder

that is actually solved by analyzing fingerprints lifted from a book of matches: the short story “Old Wives’ Tales.” As this plot is a brief one, we can excuse Rendell for her simplistic solution.

In *Kissing the Gunner’s Daughter*, Wexford and his team encounter ballistics when a gun used to murder a police officer is suspected to be the same weapon involved in the murder of an entire family. Though most police officers in Britain do not carry guns, Wexford seems to know about models and cartridges: “It was impossible to tell which, because although the cartridge was a .38, the .357 takes both .357 and .38 cartridges” (15). Rendell’s lack of absolute faith in forensics is reflected in Wexford questioning the expert witness’s inconclusive analysis: “You still can’t be sure it’s the same gun” he states, establishing that he cannot use this testimony to solve the case (277-278). Interestingly, Wexford seems to trust an American gunsmith whom he consults over the phone and says, “You don’t get so much of that ‘might have been stuff’ over there” (343). Perhaps this is Rendell’s nod to the direct speech favored by the writers of the American hard-boiled detective fiction of the 1930s and 1940s, or an assumption that Americans, with their looser gun laws, would possess a more in-depth knowledge of ballistics.

Rendell did not usually consult members of law enforcement while writing her novels. In an interview, John C. Carr asked if she’s “ever driven round with the police in their panda cars” (47). She answered, “No. I’m not really interested in the police themselves, you see. My readers don’t want that” (47). However, Rendell did dedicate the 1997 Wexford novel *Road Rage* “to the Chief Constable and officers of the Suffolk Constabulary” and included on the acknowledgement page, “My thanks are especially due to Chief Inspector Vince Coomber. . . who gave me good advice and corrected my mistakes.” Since this novel addresses eco terrorism and hostage situations, she may have felt an expert opinion was necessary.

Rendell conceded that some crime writers are careful to study the veracity of police procedures and reasoned, “If readers want that they can read somebody else” (Carr 247). Her assessment of her readership was based on experience; Rendell received a proliferation of fan mail about Wexford, and understood her audience enough to know when it was time to produce another novel in the series, even though she would have rather written a standalone crime novel or a psychological thriller under her pseudonym, Barbara Vine. These two other outlets for her creativity, paired with her tweaking of Wexford’s character and weaving topical issues like immigration, racism, environmental protection, and domestic abuse into the series, enabled her to continue writing the Wexfords and pleasing her faithful audience.

Wexford’s presence at postmortems, which does not occur often in the series, reinforces Rendell’s message that he is a seasoned professional who accepts this less enjoyable part of his job. She writes of Wexford, “Postmortems held no attractions for him, but he attended them, looked the other way as much as he could. Detective Inspector Burden was less squeamish than he and fascinated by forensics” (*End in Tears* 31). Burden was “not bothered, [it was] like watching a hospital sitcom” (*Babes* 254). The chief inspector contemplates the appeal of such a profession:

Wexford wondered how he [the pathologist] could stand that stink right up against his face. He seemed rather to enjoy it, the whole thing, the corpse, the atmosphere, the horror, the squalor. Pathologists did and just as well, really. It wouldn’t do if they shied away from it. (*Unkindness* 68)

Wexford and his team often express negative opinions about the individual pathologists who have recurring roles in the series: Dr. Basil Sumner-Quist, Sir Hilary Tremlett, Dr. Mavrikiev, and Carina Laxton. He seems to regard their services as an unwelcome necessity, and condemns

their perceived lack of empathy and feeling. Rendell may have given them the gruff impatience she had tempered in her earlier version of Wexford, a character whom she did not particularly like.

Dr. Basil Sumner-Quist, the chief inspector's "bête noire"/"black beast" (*Simisola* 194) "was anathema to Wexford. He would have much preferred Sir Hilary Tremlett" (*Kissing* 32). Sumner-Quist often jokes at the expense of the deceased, making quips such as "Dear, oh dear, how are the mighty fallen" when a victim is of the upper classes (32). According to Wexford, "bad taste, no, worse than that, outrageous, revolting lack of any taste at all, characterized the pathologist" and recalls an earlier encounter when Sumner-Quist had "referred to garroting as a 'tasty little tidbit'" (*Kissing* 32). Rendell herself agreed with Wexford; in an interview posted on the *Crime Fiction Lover* web site in 2013, she was "asked if she was tempted to write a comedy thriller, [and] she responded: 'No, I don't approve of comedy thrillers – I don't think violent death is funny.'" Wexford, not one to allow irritating or unprofessional colleagues to deter him from duty, consoles himself with the private thought, "When I kill him [Sumner-Quist], at least it'll be Old Tremlett doing the post-mortem" (*Kissing* 33). Later, he only looks at the pathologist's report briefly before attending the inquest, minimizing Sumner-Quist's contribution to the murder inquiry (99).

Based on Wexford's comparison of Sumner-Quist and Lord Tremlett, we assume he and his colleagues approve of the latter pathologist. However, Burden refers to Tremlett mockingly as "His Lordship" (*Babes* 250) when discussing a dead body with Detective Sergeant Barry Vine. Wexford tells us Tremlett's "macabre sense of humor had increased with his elevation to the peerage" (276). During the postmortem, Tremlett is amused by a dentist who retches after looking inside the cadaver's mouth and refers to himself as "a common butcher" (277). Tremlett

seems to morph into Sumner-Quist, prompting Burden to tell Wexford, “I can’t stand that man” and then, “Give me the other one – what’s he called? Mavrikiev – any time” (255). Wexford agrees. Did Rendell confuse the personalities of the two professionals? Or was this a deliberate way to attribute the same offensive characteristics to both pathologists, suggesting that all forensic professionals are equally cold and irreverent?

Wexford has “a certain respect for” Dr. Mavrikiev, an “unpredictable creature, rude or charming according to his mood” (*Road Rage* 226). This behavior, which is reminiscent of Wexford himself before Rendell improved him, is illustrated by the pathologist’s seemingly helpful information about the time of death, followed by the snide, “You’re never satisfied are you? You want everything and you want it at once. I’ve told you before, I’m not a magician.” He may bark at the investigators, but “unlike his seniors, particularly Sir Hilary Tremlett, he never indulged his wit at the expense of the corpse” (226). Mavrikiev continues, “I won’t go into a lot of technical stuff, it’ll be in the report” before firing another verbal shot at the inspector: “If you expect a great handprint in the middle of her back, that kind of thing doesn’t happen” (233-234). By omitting the details of the postmortem, Rendell spares the reader (and herself) from an interruption in the narrative to share “evidence . . . most of it technical and obscure, an analysis of the nature of certain wounds and fractures” which Mavrikiev later presents to the Coroner’s Court (250-251). She also uses Mavrikiev’s reminder as a way to manage the reader’s expectations: no, the case will not be solved by identifying a handprint. Such a simple solution is not Rendell’s style.

Finally, the young Carina Laxton appears in Kingsmarkham with the same scorn for the detectives’ probing questions. In *Not in the Flesh*, she snaps at Detective Sergeant Hannah Goldsmith and her colleague: “And how long have you two been in the force? Isn’t it about time

you knew I can't give you an immediate answer when a cadaver's obviously been buried for years?" (13). The rookie investigators embody views similar to Rendell's readers when it comes to trusting the forensics in her novels. Detective Constable Lynn Fancourt confesses, "I never will understand how they can say someone's been eight or ten or, come to that, twenty years dead just by poking about with bones. Or how old they are." Hannah laughs and answers, "They can, though. You just have to accept it" (48). And we do. This does not mean that Rendell avoids exposing the fallibility of forensic science. A possible relative of a murder victim is swabbed for DNA, but it is later discovered he was adopted so the results are moot. Laxton also informs Wexford that "dental records are useful only if you have some idea as to whose body you are looking at" (145). The limitations of this particular forensic method resurface in *The Vault*, when a murder victim is possibly a recent immigrant who was not likely to have visited a local dentist.

Though Rendell believed the forensic details should be correct if and when she chose to include it in her novels, there is one Wexford tale in which she may have missed the mark. It is in *Harm Done* where the author's glossing over of detailed police procedure – specifically a physical exam and rape testing – encroaches on the believability of both the plot and the behavior of her experienced inspector. Sixteen-year-old Lizzie, "with a low IQ and . . . rather slow and timid," suddenly reappears after her parents report her missing (4). Wexford is with her mother and step-father when Lizzie rings her own doorbell, soaking wet, "apparently unharmed" (8). Rendell goes on to tell us, "Wexford left, deputing Mike Burden and Lynn Fancourt to talk to Lizzie after she had had a hot bath" (8). Why doesn't he suggest or even insist on a physical exam? Lizzie either will not or cannot reveal where she had been; her mother even says, "I mean, she could be pregnant . . . I reckon she ought to be examined" (16). If Wexford had stayed and talked to Lizzie himself, he would have learned that her disappearance was more suspicious than

going “off with some boy, I dare say” (8). Perhaps in the eyes of the police she is considered an adult because “the law requires a parent or responsible adult to be present only when a child is under sixteen” (14) and they would not feel obligated to insist on a rape exam or test her blood for substances. Yet, when a second woman returns with a memory lapse after she is reported missing for several days, this time an 18-year-old college student named Rachel, Wexford says, “You should see a doctor. You must do that anyway” (74). The inconsistent manner in which he handles each missing person’s reappearance distracts the reader from the narrative and raises questions about Wexford’s reliability as a detective. A seasoned professional operating in a similar scenario would have ensured that standard procedure was followed and not permitted a confused and perhaps traumatized Lizzie to wash before a medical exam.

Furthermore, Rendell allows Wexford to rely too much on his intuition when he chooses not to take fingerprints from the abandoned house in which Lizzie eventually tells Detective Constable Lynn Fancourt she spent three days. He tells Burden, “She wasn’t in that house – oh we could only establish that for sure by taking her fingerprints and going over the place – but I know she wasn’t” (21). Surprisingly, after talking to Lizzie himself, he changes his mind: “Wexford was suddenly sure that she *had* been in that house, not for three days and nights certainly, but she had been inside it, she knew it” (41). Dusting for fingerprints, not Wexford’s *fingerspeitzengefühl*, would have provided a clear answer earlier in the investigation. Rendell mentions the fingerprint team, albeit briefly, in her previous Wexford novels; therefore, this decision is perplexing. The reader can blame Wexford’s clouded judgment when he forgoes the fingerprinting analysis of the house, but it is Rendell who erroneously allows Lizzie to bypass a medical examination upon her reappearance while insisting Rachel have one. Though the forensic mistake in *Harm Done* is bothersome, Rendell makes them so rarely that she does not

lose her audience. The novel also deals with domestic violence issues, an initiative to provide a safe haven for victims, and Wexford's complex relationship with his daughter Sylvia. Therefore, it is possible to appreciate Rendell's narrative and themes in *Harm Done* even with the forensic inconsistencies.

Although Wexford grows more progressive socially and politically, echoing his creator's own beliefs, he draws the line at embracing the technological advances of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This is similar to his refusal to accept forensics as a policeman's most valuable asset. In 2013, Rendell told the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, "[Wexford's] not high-tech, but then nor am I." However, the interviewer observes "She has three iPods, an iPhone, three computers – plus another one in the House of Lords – and a number of memory sticks which . . . [she finds] very useful." Perhaps Rendell keeps Wexford from adapting the devices she uses herself as a way to distinguish between writer and character. She clearly knows how to employ the jargon as she has his colleagues and family members explain the devices and their processes, and the narrative includes Wexford's observations of the operations which often cause him confusion. He may possess an understanding of human nature and talent for solving murders, yet he is struggling to keep up with the rapid changes in technology that other characters find intuitive. This challenge, perhaps a familiar one to a generation who did not grow up using computers and mobile telephones, is likely another way Rendell's readers connect with him.

The chief inspector's avoidance of a high-tech lifestyle is not limited to his discomfort with mobile telephones, computers, and the Internet. As early as 1969 in *The Best Man to Die*, we see his suspicion of the automatic supplanting the manual when a lift is installed in the police station. Wexford does not understand why the stairs were not good enough, and he is afraid of finding himself trapped in the machine. Unfortunately, this actually happens to him during a

crucial point in the case, justifying his concerns. It is no wonder that he also has a fear of getting stuck in the “automatic ticket things” at the train station in *Shake Hands Forever* (108). Wexford also notes how technological advancements can perpetuate crime in *No More Dying Then*:

“When a child disappears one of the first things we consider is that he or she was picked up by a car. Another disservice done to the world by the inventor of the internal combustion engine, or did kids once get abducted in carriages?” (313). Rendell recycles this sentiment when Wexford remarks in *The Babes in the Wood*, “The phone sat on its little table, silent and accusatory, a small white instrument whose invention and subsequent universal use had probably caused more trouble than the internal combustion engine” (315). He notices that the absence of ticket takers at the train station eliminates possible witnesses, especially in the case of his own wife’s disappearance in *Road Rage*. These comments appear in moments of frustration, only natural in high-stress investigations. Of course, certain advances have facilitated his investigations, including Internet searching and mobile phone tracking, and Wexford could not operate efficiently in the digital age without these tools. However, this does not mean he must be the one to use them.

Younger detectives, including women and racial and ethnic minorities, join Wexford’s team, and they bring diverse perspectives and skills to the job. As digital natives, they also provide computer knowledge and allow the department to conduct investigations in the new millennium. It is clear to Wexford’s colleagues, friends, and family that he requires assistance when interacting with technology. Wexford asks Detective Sergeant Hannah Goldsmith to “get something up on the computer” and “As usual, [he] admired the facility in which she did this. He would have got into a mess. He would have got into a hyperlink or inadvertently sent an email attachment” (*End in Tears* 75). Wexford is aware of his shortcomings and knows whom to ask

for help. When his wife Dora takes a computer course, he takes advantage of her new skills and she patiently helps him locate information online. Sometimes, after a phone book or encyclopedia fails him, he tries to navigate the Internet himself, though he is uncomfortable using the tool: “In spite of the help it had been to him, the Internet was always the last source to come to mind...For the first time he had succeeded in conjuring up out of that infernal machine exactly what he wanted. It must have been because he was relaxed about it – or hopeless” (354).

Though Rendell does not age Wexford and Burden in real time, she does modernize the eras in which they exist, especially in the final three novels in the series. The inspectors and their constituents are adapting to cultural changes as well as rapid technological advances in information-gathering, communication, and forensics. A weary and reflective Wexford is slowing down, his career drawing to a close, and Burden is ascending as his replacement in the department. In 2009, Rendell published *The Monster in the Box*, the 22nd novel in the series and features Wexford revisiting his past when he recognizes a man whom he had tried to prove a murderer since the beginning of his police career. When Wexford spots his nemesis after many years, Eric Targo is carrying a laptop, aligning a dubious character, and possibly an elusive criminal, with a machine the inspector also regards with suspicion. Wexford thinks of asking his colleagues to look up Targo’s marital status and means of livelihood on the Internet; instead he asks his grandson who “like all bright children, went to his computer and came up with answers in a few minutes” (9).

Wexford confesses his preoccupation to Burden (and the reader), relaying the details of the early murder which he was and still is convinced Targo committed. Along the way, he touches on the evolution of forensics, and Rendell includes a jab about the uncertainty of the science, even in the context of 21st-century investigations:

We had no scenes of crime officer at that time. DC Pendle . . . and I went around the house, paying particular attention to the bedroom, taking fingerprints. DNA had been discovered, but Watson, Crick, and Wilkins had yet to win the Nobel Prize for their work. It would be a long time before it could be put to forensic use, and it's not foolproof yet, is it? But fingerprint detection had been around for a long time. (19)

Although he had lifted fingerprints at the scene of the crime, Wexford quickly distances his own involvement in further activities by switching to the third person. He concedes, "By our present day standards, they were a bit cavalier about taking measurements and photographs, but I daresay what they did was adequate" (21). He also adds, "No one was fingerprinted...These days we'd no doubt have taken DNA from everyone, men and women, on both sides of the street and streets beyond as well, but not then, not possible then" (29). Interestingly, Wexford uses "we" in this scenario; as a rookie, he would have been one of the officers going door to door, asking for DNA samples. Rendell (and Wexford) is likely referencing a groundbreaking murder case in Leicestershire, just three hours north of Sussex. In 1986, Colin Pitchfork was convicted of murdering two women based on DNA fingerprinting; Rendell must have read about such a high-profile investigation in Britain even without conducting in-depth research. Wexford would have certainly known about it, even in his fictional sphere, as would many readers (Elvidge *Explore Forensics*).

The chief inspector grudgingly admits such improvements may have changed the outcome of the case, setting him free from hunting Targo, his white whale. "We have far more sophisticated forensic methods these days, as you know. If we haven't yet perfected tracing perpetrators by means of DNA, we're fast getting there" (*Monster* 47). Wexford continues to relay his story to Burden for 90 minutes. After he points out that car doors at the time did not

Commented [j1]: I wonder if it should be the title of the article "Forensic Cases: Colin Pitchfork, First Exoneration Through DNA" instead? I defer to your judgment.

open remotely, Burden interjects, “I had been born, you, know, I even remember the moon landings” (23). Wexford doesn’t seem to hear him; he feels the need to explain “there was nothing like the proliferation of news then that there is now. Radio, yes, and TV, of course, but only two channels and no breakfast television. Newspapers, but no use to you if you didn’t have one delivered by nine in the morning” (27). Perhaps Rendell, too, is underestimating her readers’ knowledge and memory and is using Wexford’s recollections as a device to educate all of us. Or perhaps she is further humanizing Wexford, giving him a pedantic streak as he grows older and more experienced in his position.

In *The Monster in the Box*, he still cannot be bothered with forensics experts, echoing the Wexford of forty years earlier in *From Doon with Death*. The following exchange between Wexford and his subordinate illustrates his dismissive attitude:

“Pathologist’s just come, sir. He’s with the deceased now.”

“Who is it?” Wexford asks.

“Dr. [Mavrikiy].”

“I don’t mean the pathologist. Who cares, anyway? I mean who’s what you call ‘the deceased’”? (*Monster* 146)

His attitude extends to computer technicians. Rendell writes, “Wexford’s own skills in this particular technology were limited, but still he had an idea that a consultant or engineer or whatever the man was could make adjustments to what he called a machine by what he called remote control” (*Monster* 124). Wexford does recognize his own limitations, but it is unclear if he is bothered by them. He characterizes a possible suspect, in a matter-of-fact way, as “A man who hasn’t basic computer skills – like me” (243). The chief inspector may at times take pride in his Luddite ways, or he may feel out of place in his changing environment; he seems to vacillate

between both, representing a realistic internal struggle to maintain his individuality while remaining relevant in his profession.

Even after Wexford recalls the Targo case and recognizes how advances in forensic technology would have benefitted the investigation, he seems to reject the notion that such developments, whether in forensics or in everyday life, minimizes crime and improves security. At one point he tells Burden, “The mobile phone makes communication a whole lot easier. Parents ought to be able to keep a closer eye on where their children are – but do they? I don’t know” (111). This statement is reminiscent of his previous condemnation of cars as abduction facilitators in *The Babes in the Wood*. He continues to muse about various cultural and environmental changes that have taken place in Kingsmarkham: “So was it better today? Were things better? The answer was always the same, some better, some worse” (47). His conclusion, though not profound, seems to summarize Rendell’s own perspective on the place of forensics in her fiction and perhaps in society as well:

As far as forensics go, it gets more and more complex because more advanced techniques are always being discovered. There are all these analysis of tissues, of hair, of fingerprints, of bits of skin, and of almost everything else that can be done, but it doesn't interest me. (Carr 248)

Wexford himself appears to have chosen not to stay abreast of the latest technologies. Similar to his periodic allusions to forensics, the chief inspector’s comments indicate he is well aware of mobile devices and the Internet. He engages with them as needed, but the reader does not see him embracing these tools as part of his day-to-day life. Like Wexford, Rendell was acquainted with technological developments, understood how they can help, recognized they cannot be used to solve every crime, and chose not to spend her time learning about them.

Two years after *The Monster in the Box* appeared, Rendell published *The Vault*, the penultimate Wexford novel and the first installment to feature the chief inspector in retirement. Incidentally, *The Vault* is the only Wexford work which references a standalone Ruth Rendell novel: it can be considered a sequel to *A Sight for Sore Eyes* (1999). Wexford and Dora now have a second home in London, the carriage house behind their daughter Sheila's residence, and Rendell reassures us Wexford "is still a reader" and "he loved music, Bach, Handel, lots of opera" but "missed what had been his life. He missed being a policeman" (7). As many of Rendell's readers have followed the chief inspector's long, fictitious career – and may be approaching or experiencing retirement themselves – his struggle to cope with his new identity as a private citizen is likely a familiar one. This new layer of Wexford's character, coupled with the urban setting, reinvigorates the series and inspires readers to follow him as he investigates at least one more crime.

While walking in London, he encounters Detective Superintendent Thomas Ede, a former colleague of his nephew's in the Metropolitan Police Service, who later telephones him for help with a murder investigation. Wexford agrees, happy to join the inquiry after four bodies were discovered in an underground vault that had been sealed with a manhole cover. Thus begins his new role as "expert advisor," lending his years of experience to Ede's team (*Vault* 10). With a renewed confidence, Wexford conducts interviews, offers hypotheses, and even ventures to find information online, though he is still unsure of the best approach: "The Internet? Wexford was on shaky ground here. He never quite knew what the Internet or a search engine could do or could not" (60). Later, to Burden, he marvels at the nature of present-day search terms and says, "When I was a young DC in Brighton about a hundred years ago, we used to come across...brothels. I suppose if I got someone to find *brothels* on the Internet, I'd just get

quantities of porn” (226). Wexford does make progress with the computer. Rather than calling a classic car expert in America, the cost for which he is no longer entitled to be reimbursed, he sends his very first email. “Or he thought he had until one arrived to tell him that someone called the postmaster wanted him to know that delivery had failed” (49). The problem was quickly solved; he had only spelled the recipient’s name wrong. He also finds Wikipedia a useful resource as he prepares to visit a local dealership. These small successes with technology are applauded by the reader, as many of us have experienced similar victories when conquering the fear of learning a new skill.

Wexford’s investigative style and approach to crime-solving has not changed, even in quasi-retirement. Ede is not accustomed to his process, and Wexford tells him, “You say I’m acting on my imagination and you may be right, but I see it as acting from my knowledge of human nature” (135). As the case progresses and the two men differ on how to interpret a witness interview, Ede comments, “I’m not saying you haven’t done well, Reg, but you’re very hot on all this psychology and knowing human nature and all of that.” (221). Wexford struggles with feeling dismissed and no longer being “the law incarnate” as he once was in Kingsmarkham (10). Nevertheless, he successfully helps solve the murders, despite suffering bodily harm during the plot’s climax, and reestablishes his self-worth before debriefing his most loyal supporter and friend, Mike Burden. The relationship between Wexford and Burden has been a reassuring touchstone throughout the series, and this last scene reiterates the former chief inspector’s ability to maintain a friendship and rely on the listening ear of a respected colleague.

In 2013, Rendell published her final Wexford novel, *No Man’s Nightingale*, about the murder of a beloved female cleric, Sarah Hussein. Wexford is back in Kingsmarkham and serving as an unofficial consultant to Burden, who is now running the department. The reader

finds Wexford “sitting in a cane armchair doing what many a man or woman plans to do on retirement but few put into practice, reading the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*” (3). Burden invites him along on a case. This role is an unlikely and unrealistic one – though less so than his position as expert advisor to Ede, nearly a stranger, in *The Vault*. After 24 books, however, it is easy for loyal readers to accept the fantasy of a retired Wexford summoned to help.

True to character, Wexford is not spending his days surfing the Web. When he checks the news for information about the murder case, Rendell writes, “he could have seen more online, but he had cringed from its colorful headlines” (5). He owns a mobile phone but has to ask his wife Dora to help him send a text (92). As usual, it would not occur to him to Google the instructions. Technology still seems magical to Wexford, similar to how forensic results often appear in his possession. His grandson’s girlfriend books train tickets online for him and shows him a map: “Clarissa had conjured it all up on her mobile...marked it with something that looked to Wexford like a lollipop” (254). On Christmas Day, Wexford admires the new iPod he receives from his grandson, but has to ask what the device was for (168) and later refers to another device as a “new variety of music transmission” (264). Wexford may know how to conduct a murder investigation, but he cannot upload Bach to an iPod, a task children can accomplish. His responses do add an element of humor to the novels, but they also enable Rendell to reiterate her protagonist’s realistic traits.

Wexford’s views on technology are also evident when he returns to the police station in *No Man’s Nightingale*. When the retired chief inspector attends one of Burden’s new daily “team conferences” – which Wexford believes are a waste of time and money – he is clearly on the sidelines, perplexed but vaguely curious about the new technology the detectives use to display

images and photographs relevant to the case (104). At one point Wexford asks if a witness had taken a photo of a passport with her mobile phone, and Burden says dismissively, “It would be difficult with an ordinary mobile. Anyway, she didn’t” (261). It certainly would be possible to take a photo with a mobile phone, but his response may indicate Burden does not know much more than Wexford does. The younger man also struggles with the era of mobile communication and questions its ability to free him from his desk. He says, “In this age of technology, we’ve no need to be here. We might as well be down the pub...But somehow I know I’d feel guilty awaiting news” (214). Though Burden is more interested in forensic science than is Wexford, even he does not trust the reliability of the latest communication devices.

Wexford seems to have grown even less tolerant of forensics experts, in particular Dr. Mavriekiev: “How could I forget the prince of the pathologists? A white-blond creature of moods, ice and incandescence. He got the news of his first child’s birth while he was poking about with some corpse here and it changed him for the better” (10). One of Wexford’s former colleagues encourages him by sharing that the pathologist “[made] some rude remarks about how the police – in their ignorance – his words – expected pathologists to be clairvoyants” (10). However, when authorities are using samples of a victim’s DNA to check against a tracksuit they found, Wexford has no comment about the test’s reliability (226). Perhaps he (or Rendell) is conceding, at the conclusion of the series, that this area of forensic science is perfectly acceptable as evidence.

Though Ruth Rendell both identified with and distanced herself from Wexford throughout her writing life, she ensured his continual evolution as a relatable character. Readers follow him as he negotiates his inevitable changing role in the police department, the community, and the social and cultural environment in which he exists. Rendell has also openly stated her disinterest in forensic details and has imparted this sentiment to Wexford. As a

professional writer, she made a creative decision to ignore the parts of the crime fiction genre that did not interest her. Instead, she focused on the humanity of the protagonist who happens to be a police officer. Her aversion to forensics is similar to how Wexford shies away from technology, which is evident in how he responds to computer technology and mobile communication devices. She wanted him to be believable as a man, but she acknowledges that “no policeman is really like Wexford. No policeman can be like Burden. Because anyone who has been a policeman so long will be so hardened that the prudishness won't exist anymore. I doubt if any policeman in Wexford's position would be as sensitive as he is” (Carr 247). Fans appreciated his sensitivity: One woman, blurring fiction and reality, asked Rendell to kill off Wexford's wife so she could marry him instead (Bishopsgate Institute, 2014). A fantasy, indeed.

Rendell did not feel compelled to follow a standard police procedural formula or craft forensics-driven plots to continue selling books about a chief inspector in Sussex. She recognized that her own satisfaction must take precedence. Contemporary readers accustomed to watching television series like *CSI*, where forensic procedures are at the center of the narrative, may find it easy to imagine that the latest processes are applied in the Wexford novels, even if Rendell does not write them into a scene.

In 1991, Dale Salwak asked Rendell what she thought made for a successful detective novel, and she responded: “Character, always character – for any novel. I maintain that if you don't care for the people, if you can't identify with them or feel empathy, you aren't going to care what happens” (94). Her readers certainly cared about her chief inspector, the protagonist of a series she had not planned. In a tribute to Rendell after her death, Val McDermid wrote, “[Wexford] was blessed with intelligence and common sense but he was as flawed as the rest of us and he felt like someone you might meet in your local pub.” Reginald Wexford may be a

fantasy policeman, but he is also an enduring companion, one his creator could live with for 50 years.

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